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*Testimony of*  
**Faith Sweeney**  
*Before the Education Committee*  
**SB 1094 An Act Concerning the Implementation of Reading Models or Programs**  
*March 1, 2023*

My name is Faith Sweeney. I have been a teacher for 27 years and am a K-5 literacy coach with Westport public schools. I am also serving as a Teaching Fellow with the National Education Association and am testifying today on behalf of CEA.

CEA supports the waiver provisions in SB 1094, which provide some flexibility in the Right to Read Act of 2021. However, we are concerned that the limitations on approved reading programs and curricula prevent teachers from promoting reading as best they can. The prescribed nature of such programs and inflexible pacing make it difficult for teachers to personalize reading instruction by meeting children where they are.

As an educator for 27 years, I have experienced the impact of the Right to Read Act. As a teacher, I have seen children struggle with phonics and oral reading – the same struggles I experienced when I was their age. I know from both experiences that there is not one program or strategy that fixes reading difficulties.

What matters in overcoming reading challenges is time, continued support, high expectations, and a variety of resources that can help children thrive as readers, as they helped me years ago. From these experiences, I believe that the Right to Read mandate requiring school districts to choose one of the five “approved” reading programs is creating a larger disparity between students, schools, and districts. It sets unrealistic expectations and does not encourage educators to be responsive action researchers in teaching reading.

Additionally, implementation of the programs is costly to districts. For example, in small districts with only five elementary schools, the cost to purchase and implement an “approved” program is about \$1 million – imagine the cost for districts with more than five elementary schools. And these costs are made at the expense of relevant professional development and hiring additional educators who could provide small group and even 1-1 instruction.

There is not one program that meets the needs of all students as readers.

As a K-5 literacy coach, I understand what it takes to help students grow in their reading skills, interest, and achievement. Effectiveness requires the flexible use of multiple resources, ongoing training, literacy coaching and collaboration, literacy intervention, and ongoing monitoring to

help each and every student grow as a reader. Furthermore, the mandate is undoing the work that many districts have undergone, dedicating countless hours over the years to finding the right balance of resources and methods. The long-term benefits of this continuous mode of reflection, research, and refinement have been invaluable.

We are also concerned about the limitations of the approved programs. Some “approved” programs do not even include a phonics component that is required by the law. We are concerned that there is a lack of culturally responsive representation (for example, when animal characters are exclusively used instead of people). There is a lack of comprehensiveness in the strategies used, and excessive scripting of lessons leaves teachers less able to connect with their students and students less able to learn how to think critically.

Reading includes joy, exploration, engagement, and experiences that our students can connect to on a daily basis. Good reading instruction taps into the joy that inspires children to learn to read. It means not relying on test scores but observing what they are doing on a daily basis. Good reading teachers listen to students reading and how they discuss what they read. They watch how their students are engaged in the texts. When they see something not going as desired, they research, collaborate, and find what will work to inspire students to read and thrive as readers. This is the sort of action-research approach to improving reading instruction that best serves children and improves instruction. It is a valuable process that gets lost when we focus on programs over people.

The work of the Center for Literacy Research and Reading Success and the Reading Leadership Implementation Council is laudable. However, the Center and Council could be more valuable through better collaboration with literacy coaches, literacy interventionists, and special education teachers from across the state. The informed observations and lived experiences of teachers working directly with students daily could provide helpful insights into effective instructional strategies. We would welcome an opportunity to connect a diversity of teachers and their experiences to this work.

Thank you for your consideration,